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UNCLAS ALMATY 000215

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STATE FOR EUR/CACEN (JMUDGE), EUR/PPD (JBASEDOW), DRL/PHD
(PDAVIS)

STATE PLS. PASS TO USAID

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: INDEPENDENT MEDIA OUTLETS COVETED BY NAZARBAYEV
FAMILY EMPIRE

Ref: A) Almaty 109 B) Almaty 83

1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Media advocates in Kazakhstan report that over the past few weeks, momentum has been building to consolidate ownership of influential media outlets among Nazarbayev loyalists in advance of the presidential elections. A source within the presidential administration revealed that Igor Meltzer, the editor of the successful weekly newspaper, Vremya, is facing increasing pressure from the administration to resign his editorship and take the helm of a public relations agency serving the administration. A Vremya shareholder, KazKommertzbank chairman Nurzhan Subkhanberdin, is also being pressured to sell his stake in exchange for "immunity" from harassment by national banking conglomerates. NGO sources say another nominally independent television station, Channel 31, was recently purchased by President Nazarbayev's son-in-law. These maneuvers reflect at least an ongoing tendency to keep media in check, and more likely an acceleration of the administration's efforts to gain a complete monopoly over Kazakhstan's most influential media outlets. END SUMMARY.

Vremya: Change at the Helm?

2. (SBU) Citing a source within the presidential administration, Deutsche Welle carried a report on January 9 stating that since mid-December Igor Meltzer, the editor-in-chief of a popular weekly newspaper, Vremya, has been under strong pressure to resign his position as editor and take the helm of a public relations agency serving the administration. Vremya's reporting "did not suit" the administration, according to the source, due to the overall oppositional tone and in particular for "propagandizing" the ideas of opposition political party Ak Zhol. Vremya deputy editor-in-chief Marat Asipov denied the rumors about pressure from the administration.

3. (SBU) Media observers believe Vremya does receive financial support from Kazkommertsbank and that bank director Nurzhan Subkhanberdin, a majority shareholder, does at times exert influence over the paper's content, in favor of the Ak Zhol party. Subkhanberdin is not a registered member of the party. (Note: In early December Subkhanberdin, along with other heads of Kazakhstan's seven largest banks, signed a statement addressed to the President promising not to participate in, or finance, the activities of political parties.) Meltzer, however, tries to balance coverage of the presidential administration with an equal amount of time for the opposition, and he strives to offer all sides a forum to express their views.

Vremya's Commercial Sponsorship

4. (SBU) Deutsche Welle's source also said Subkhanberdin had been pressured to sell part of his stake to Bulat Utemuratov, Secretary of the Security Council and chairman of the National Commission on Democracy and Civil Society, in exchange for "immunity" from harassment by national banking conglomerates. The source said the administration had already determined that the Halyk (Narodnyi) Savings Bank would become Vremya's new "sponsor." Former Presidential economic advisor Grigory Marchenko was appointed chairman of Halyk Savings Bank on January 10 (Ref A).

5. (SBU) Ak Zhol co-chairman Altynbek Sarsenbaiuly told Deutsche Welle that Vremya shareholders affiliated with the administration have established firm control over the paper, and any coverage of Ak Zhol members has become problematic. He also said that someone from the presidential administration called the paper and forbade it from publishing pictures of events unfolding in Kiev, related to the presidential elections there.

Vremya's Management

16. (SBU) Meltzer is well-known for his professionalism and dedication to the news business. With a circulation of

180,000, Vremya is the most popular newspaper in Kazakhstan, excluding the weekly Karavan. Meltzer managed and ran Karavan as a serious newspaper before it was purchased in 1997 by first son-in-law Rahat Aliyev and turned into a tabloid. In the mid 1990's Meltzer was general director of KTK Television, which Aliyev also purchased. KTK was Kazakhstan's first independent television station and under Meltzer's stewardship gained a loyal following for its news programs criticizing government officials, as well as entertainment programs catering to a mass audience. KTK's news coverage is now distinctly pro-administration and sharply critical of the opposition.

Channel 31

17. (SBU) In other developments, Rozlan Taukina, president of the media advocacy NGO "Journalists in Trouble," reported that second son-in-law Timur Kulibayev has added Channel 31 to his media empire, which already includes the Kazakhstan affiliates of Komsomolskaya Pravda, Argumenty i Fakty, and Moskovskii Komsomolets, as well as Astana TV, Tan TV, and the daily newspaper, Liter. If true, Kulibayev's purchase of Channel 31 means that all nine television networks that broadcast in multiple locations are owned or controlled either by the state or the Nazarbayev family.

18. (SBU) Comment: These maneuvers reflect at the least the administration's ongoing tendency to keep media in check, and more likely indicate an acceleration of efforts to gain a complete monopoly over Kazakhstan's most influential media outlets. Media advocates perceive an alarming trend to silence dissent, a trend that includes the one billion tenge (\$7.5 million) lawsuit filed by Dariga Nazarbayeva's Khabar television company in October against Ak-Zhol's Sarsenbaiulyreft, the December 30 defamation lawsuit filed against former presidential insider-turned-critic Zamenbek Nurkadilov, and the speedy ruling January 6 to dissolve the opposition Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan party (Ref B). If Vremya does end up in Halyk Bank's portfolio, the question arises, which outlet is next?

19. (U) Dushanbe minimize considered.

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